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Social Enterprise, education and the new political economy of Nepal: a research program

Stephen Carney

This article presents a research agenda for studying social enterprise (SE) initiatives in education reform. Whilst based on research experiences gained in Nepal, the discussion here is relevant for similar SE efforts in other ‘developing’ countries as well as high-income contexts that are increasing adopting SE strategies that have been tested elsewhere. The paper outlines how changing processes of governance position SE initiatives as potential solutions to a range of problems that have structural roots in conflicts related to ethnicity, gender and class. However, whilst SE is a new mode of organizing our understanding of such issues, it also has the potential to re-inscribe historic marginalities in new ways. A research agenda focused on exploring the lived experience of SE aims to expose such possibilities and dangers.

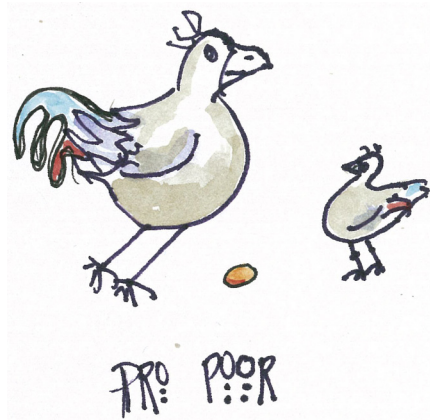
Introduction

This article outlines a *potential* research agenda for exploring the role that social enterprise (SE) initiatives might play in supporting education reform efforts in the ‘global south’. It draws on recent education policy initiatives in one so-called ‘developing’ country – Nepal – but has relevance for education reforms in other developing countries. Indeed, the broader relevance of the issues raised here are worthy of consideration for those engaged in developing SE initiatives more generally, not least because the field of SE gains so much of its legitimacy from apparent successes in low-income countries.

The potential (both positive and negative) of SE in any particular context must, however, be understood *in relation to* that context. In the case of Nepal, a society marked not only by persistent issues of poverty and injustice but by a global ‘development’ apparatus that structures the Country as deficient and inferior to its politically-powerful



neighbors, western donor ‘partners’ and an abstract cosmopolitan ideal, SE initiatives run the danger of being re-inscribed in ways that create new marginalities. Instead of research aimed at *improving* SE and its role in ‘pro-poor’ development, this is a call for a distinctive Roskilde University approach to field study aimed at exploring critically the lived experiences of SE policies, many of which are being reified in the policy literature in ways that simplify what are in fact hugely diverse sets of interventions with complex effects. My focus in this article is on the field of formal schooling; an emerging field of interest for SE ‘entrepreneurs’.



After ‘development’: Entrepreneurship?

Critiques of ‘development’ models based on heavily state-focused institutional investments, standardized policy prescriptions and universal target setting (Fowler 2000) have been widespread since the 1970s, culminating in a thorough questioning of the ‘Washington consensus’ with its prioritizing of macroeconomic stabilization, trade liberalization and economic growth. In its place or, rather, alongside this agenda, have been concerted efforts to center local actors in development initiatives in order to encourage ownership and participation in reform processes. Notwithstanding the realization that the ‘last should come first’ (Chambers, 1998), development efforts continue to struggle in meeting their targets or in improving the lives of the poor.

Most development efforts have been oriented *through* the state as part of a joint ambition to enhance individual life experiences *and* state capacity. In ‘weak’ or ‘failing’ states (terms used by the development community) local-level development (i.e., that aimed mainly at individual livelihoods) is seen as being deeply compromised by weak national, regional and local state-based political structures. We focus on the ‘political state’ even though it continues to struggle to realize its potential. Some actually identify the state as the mediator if not author of multiple problems such as corruption, violence, marginality and economic waste. From this perspective, the state is viewed as being the *problem*, not the *solution*! In a break with conventional thinking, one influential academic of social entrepreneurship suggests that we devote more thought to the notion of the ‘enterprise state’ (Scott et al., 2012). Whilst crude versions of this thesis circulated

in the form of neo-liberal macro-economic ideology in the 1980s, a more sophisticated version has returned to us through a multi-stranded discourse on the entrepreneurial subject. This has potential as well as danger.

Micro-finance schemes (MFS) are one obvious example of development aimed at reaching the poor on their own terms via small-scale, mass interventions that build on people's own perceptions of their needs and existing social competences and networks whilst avoiding state capture. Much research identifies the benefits of this approach, not least in terms of increased economic autonomy, self-determination, improved health and access to state resources such as education, public services and so forth. These results have positioned MFS as a 'silver bullet' in development policy, not least in terms of women's empowerment. However, the efficacy of MFS has also been challenged by skeptical scholars (Fernando, 2006) and disillusioned practitioners (Sinclair 2012). MFS attempts to integrate participants into the formal (waged) economy, often at low and exploited levels of the capitalist system. In some cases, MFS's are based on restrictive or harsh loan and repayment systems, adding to the difficulties of the poor. Much MFS is unregulated by the state, generating huge profits for a few investors and misery to the masses. In addition to macro-level analyses, scholars are also exploring the new subjectivities emerging from engagement in MFS where existing social relations in families, marriages and communities are often challenged and destabilized (Sigalla & Carney, 2012). Much of the gloss of MFS has been rubbed off, forcing donors to temper their unbridled enthusiasm for bottom-up transformations through enterprise development.



MFS should not, however, be conflated or confused with SE, a field that is still emerging from diverse practices across the public sphere, non-profit sector and the formal market economy. Whilst the blurred boundaries of much SE activity hamper definitional and theoretical precision (Short et al., 2009), SEs are generally understood as combining business/ commercial goals with a commitment to social ends (Spear et al., 2009). Some definitions, like that from the UK Government's SE Unit, insist that surpluses be 'reinvested' into the business or community instead of withdrawn as profit (DTI, 2002). Irrespective of this overall rational – 'profit' or 'surplus' – SEs are viewed not just as alternative forms of organization but as part of a 'shadow state' (Nicholls, 2006) able to fill 'institutional voids' and address market failures in welfare provision (Nicholls, 2012: 188). A common theme in the literature concerns the *nature* of social value creation (Alvarez & Barney, 2007) and in relation to development policy, the issue of sustainability is also emerging as central (Seelos & Mair, 2005) with an understanding that SE interventions be grounded in the basic needs and interests of peoples (Hulgård

& Shajahan, 2013). Here, issues of market relevance and social justice intersect with the field of SE gaining considerable prestige from the apparent successes of ‘integrated’ or ‘hybrid’ SE’s such as BRAC and Grameen Bank. In this sense, SE could be understood as a field of potential that avoids the pitfalls of micro-lending.

Notwithstanding these clear differences, the focus on surplus rather than profit speaks to the development policy agenda of social inclusion, equity and poverty reduction, but also to ongoing strategies within OECD nations to reduce public investments in essential services, enhance efficiencies through cost-sharing and shape new subjective relations between people, markets and government. In the context of development practice, SE thus finds itself in a problematic discursive space where the imperatives of economic liberalism, commercialization and privatization are presented as strategies for the promotion of pro-poor development (Prahalad & Hammond, 2002). In order to understand how this emerging space came to be it is necessary to explore the meaning(s) of governance in development policy.

Governing the soul through policy

The ‘governance’ imperative frames contemporary development debates but remains a wide-ranging and ambitious trope that, because of its conceptual looseness, is seen as causally-relevant to issues as diverse as institutional reform and effectiveness, decentralization, trade policy, macro-economic performance, democratization, gender equality and poverty reduction. The focus on ‘good’ governance ensures that ‘normative views of what “ought to be” become even more prominent’ in development discourse (Grindle, 2007: 555), blurring the boundaries between governance research and development policy (Grindle, 2010). Definitions and approaches to governance, especially by development agencies, prioritize issues such as accountability, transparency and efficiency (World Bank, 2007), access and equity (UNDP, 1997) and citizen participation and democratization (USAID, 2005). The ‘capabilities’ approach of DFID (2001) spans issues as diverse as macroeconomic stability, pro-poor policy, personal safety and security and ‘honest’ government (p. 9). The focus on ‘good’ governance appeals to those on the right concerned about law, order and efficient markets as well as those on the left who prioritize issues of social justice.

The current DANIDA¹ focus in Nepal on human rights, peace and local governance

1 The Danish Agency for Development Assistance

recognizes the Country's fragile reconstruction process after a debilitating 10-year civil war between Maoist guerillas and government forces. However, the strategy of state-based development remains fraught with risk given the persistence of low levels of structural and institutional stability, organizational capacity and, especially, legitimacy. Acknowledging these risks, the Nepali state appears very open to policy pathways that avoid centering the state in reform. For example, it wishes to 'accelerate' the privatization of public enterprises (HMG, 2002: 139) and is 'encouraging' non-governmental organizations, community bodies and institutions, users groups and the private sector to contribute to the delivery of essential services and materials (596). Public/ private partnerships (PPP) (CfBT, 2008) are identified as key vehicles for social transformation. The current Interim Plan of the Government also identifies a need for entrepreneurship training so that a culture of enterprise may tap the Country's significant yet hitherto under-utilized human resource (55). Public policy in Nepal can thus be seen as an experimental ground for new forms of state engagement where 'pro-market' strategies are now viewed as essential if the country is to find a peaceful and sustainable development model.

The search for new solutions is hardly new in Nepal. As in other 'developing countries' an initial democratic awakening – in this case in the early 1990s – led to enormous interest and engagement from donor nations and multi-lateral agencies. In Nepal, internal political change coincided with the international 'Education for All' (EFA) movement initiated at a meeting of government leaders and aid agencies in Jomtien, Thailand in 1990. The commitment to EFA thus became a fundamental pillar of Nepali public policy aimed in the main at creating a new type of democratic, nation-oriented citizen out of a society characterized by extreme ethnic, religious and geographical diversity. This vision framed the first Master Plan for the Education Sector produced by the Ministry of Education where access to schooling, improved physical infrastructure and teacher training were centered. However, at the same time as this vision was being implemented a new way of thinking about development assistance was being launched by the major agencies and development banks in response to growing criticism (especially from the banks) that reform was too heavily focused upon the state. By the middle of the decade, a second Master Plan prioritized 'decentralization' instead of 'nation-building'. Here, public policy was required to target the poor directly and to do so by avoiding the central state that was now being described, by definition, as inefficient. However, like the short-lived phase before it, the focus on decentralization was also on borrowed time. By the early 2000s, Nepali policy makers had embarked on a major new reform aimed at reducing the role of the state even further via different forms of local self-governance. In the education sector, this took form as community managed schooling. Devised by

the World Bank, this reform was aimed at redefining the relation of citizens to the state by encouraging groups, especially the poor, to supplant the dominating roles played by local elites in school governance and to make schools relevant to the needs of local communities (Carney, Bista & Agergaard, 2007). The shift to community management came at the height of the civil war and for many reasons struggled to achieve its goals of educational quality and relevance. Rather than step back and re-evaluate a complex context, donors took the initiative once more, pronouncing that the failures of the past – including the war – were due in the main to a vision of development that not only obscured the implicit potential of individuals to manage their own lives, but actively suppressed them through inefficient and uncaring government (Carney & Bista, 2009²). This was portrayed as the ‘political state’ at its worst.

It is with this context in mind that one should read the current interest in entrepreneurial solutions in Nepal. Emboldened by the praise heaped upon BRIC and Grameen by world leaders and funding agencies (coincidentally at a time of declining aid budgets), debilitated by the cost of waging war and persistent poverty and faced with the mass exodus of working age men to the gulf states in search of livelihoods, ‘development’ policy now looks to the creative, independent self-starter as the solution to a complex constellation of historically-continent social problems. In a period of 20 years, policy makers have gone from defining schooling in terms of nation building, equity and social justice, to viewing schools as islands of local diversity and autonomy. Not content with these structural transformations subjects have been defined firstly as citizens loyal to an emerging national polity, later as members of a federation of communities and, most recently, as self-determining entrepreneurs able and willing to find their own pathways to *personal* freedom. The deep hegemony of rational economic knowledge systems and the donor agencies who promote them coupled with a new value set that views the individual as standing above and sovereign over society, creates, at its intersection, the entrepreneurial subject as a new object for development interventions.

2 The brief outline of policy development in Nepal emerged from a long-term research project funded by the Danish Council for Development Research between 2003 and 2008 and utilized a Foucault-inspired genealogical approach to examine the changing rationalities of government in Nepal (Foucault, 2008).

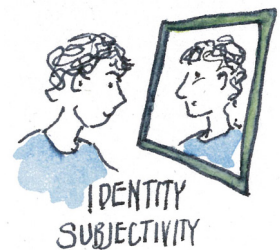
A research program

An orientation and thematic focus

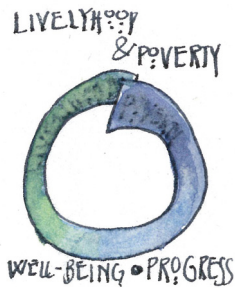
Building on my previous research on education reform in Nepal, the practice of SE in such a context requires a broad and open-ended research strategy comprising, as a minimum, theories from: development studies, especially explorations of ‘discourse’ as the frame within which certain thoughts/ concepts are possible and legitimate (Escobar, 1995); geography and political science, especially understandings of space and place that view subjectivity in relational terms (Pigg 1992) and; the sociology of organizations, especially work that explores action as constituted in dynamic, open-ended assemblages (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986). In keeping with the educational studies research tradition at Roskilde University where the subjective experiences of individuals in everyday life settings are prioritized, research would adopt a first-person perspective, viewing SE as embedded in dynamic relations. This invites for an ontology of difference that prioritizes processes of *becoming* that challenge conventional structural accounts of life under global neo-liberalism (Hillier, 2013).

Such research might then investigate the consequences for ongoing (politically-driven) nation-building efforts of an intensifying individualization and market ethos built into many (economically-oriented) SE innovations. As such, this research could be understood as considering the promise *and* perils of new forms of market-based self in what may one day be viewed as the nascent phase of a ‘post-political’ Nepali state. When operationalized in the context of Nepal’s rapidly expanding non-profit and hybrid sectors, research might be shaped around three interconnected thematic areas:

Theme 1: Subjectivity and identity: What types of subject positions are made possible through involvement in SE-inspired innovations? How do entrepreneurs in particular relate these to their on-going gendered, life-stage and ethnic identities? How do the new subjectivities support ongoing efforts to enhance community-participation as well as state-driven desires for greater social cohesion? Can the rise of a ‘self-governing entrepreneurial subject’ support national efforts towards state regeneration?



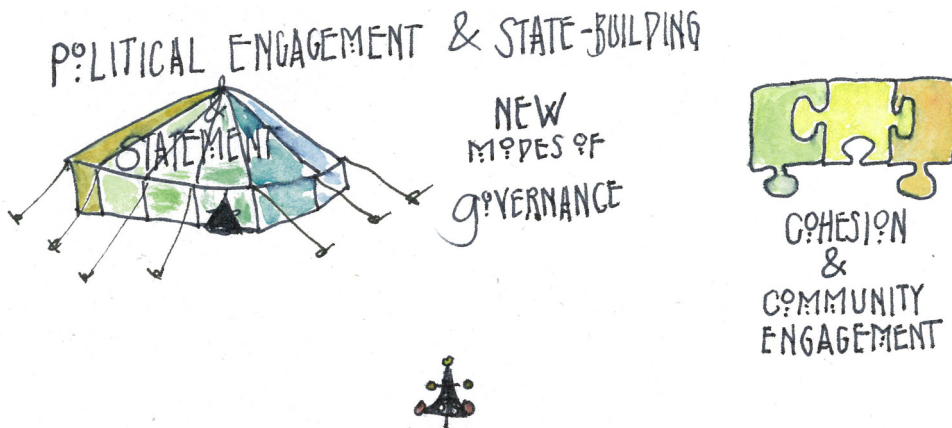
Theme 2: Livelihoods and poverty reduction: How do donor agencies, interest-groups and state-level political actors define ‘well-being’ and ‘progress’ in Nepal? If the outcomes



from SE schemes are experienced positively by participants, to what extent and in what ways are livelihoods enriched by these experiences? Given the critique of much SE as legitimating capitalist interests, in what ways can SE initiatives be understood as 'pro-poor' and how, if at all, do they support the national poverty reduction strategy? How might they be enhanced?

Theme 3: Political engagement and state-building: SE initiatives influence social capital and the formation of social networks. Do the new modes of governance and self-management theorized in SE research translate to new networks of social practices in communities? Does SE support shared structures and ambitions in Nepal or does it develop alongside or, even, in spite of state attempts to create social cohesion and community engagement? Ultimately, do SE initiatives support state-building efforts or complicate them further? Which ones and how?

The quality of schooling is a key concern for policy makers in Nepal with state-provided education often described as failing the poor, 1.7 million of whom remain out of school. How, then, might this agenda be directed to the field of education?



The enterprise school

Internationally, one area of growing policy interest is the field of low-cost private schooling for the poor (LCPS). Here, a small but influential group of scholars are exploring how local entrepreneurs are establishing for-profit schools as an alternative to state education. The claim, backed to some extent by quantitative research evidence, is that such schools achieve higher exam results on the basis of lower per-capita student funding (Tooley &

Dixon, 2007). School leadership, teacher motivation and accountability, student satisfaction and performance are all posited as being improved (Tooley, 2009), casting doubts on the accepted wisdom that the state should be responsible for formal education. This view is widely contested by many educational researchers who fear that LFSs herald the further decline of an already fragile state commitment to public education. Some argue further that the lack of affordability of LCPS for the poorest exacerbates historic marginalities, especially gender distinctions where girls in particular are relegated to failing state schools (Härmä & Rose, 2012). Nevertheless, donor agencies are beginning to take seriously the LCPS phenomena, with the British Department for International Development (DFID) in particular outlining its benefits just as it withdraws from the education sector in Nepal (DFID, 2012). Private-education in Nepal has exploded during the past 10 years; accounting for more than 15% of the sector and *all* of its growth. Debate has been furious but focused primarily on the high-fee for profit sector and framed around questions of equity and quality. However *no* data exists on the rapid growth of LCPSs (a sub-set of Nepal's 14,000 'institutional' or private schools) that claim to offer both affordable *and* high quality education for the poor. Understanding of the type of social value being created in these for-profit schools is vital. Questions include: what are the explicit goals of such schools and are they achieved? Do students gain access to greater educational opportunities as a consequence of such schooling? What types of families/communities use such schools, and why? Do they add to collective processes and solidarity in communities, or threaten and undermine already fragile social structures and cohesiveness? How might we assess the social outcome (value) of such schooling?

The enterprise teacher

Whilst issues of access, equity, private influence and thus social purpose shape debates about LCPS, entrepreneurial initiatives aimed at the teaching profession reflect much more explicit attempts to create new educational subjectivities and to connect these to networks of commercial interests (Ball, 2012). The 'Teach for All' (2012) global network is a recent phenomenon in Nepal, having already been established in almost 30 countries. Founded by Wendy Kopp in the US, Teach for All is often cited by social entrepreneurs and SE scholars as a prime example of the power of commercial interests deployed for social ends. Responding to the 'problem' of low educational quality in state schools, Teach for All recruits 'exceptional' graduates to serve in 'challenging' contexts, usually for a two-year period. These graduates receive short and highly 'performative', 'managerial' (Olmedo, 2013: 496) teacher training which contrasts to the broad train-

ing provided in traditional university courses. Business-oriented leadership training is provided by commercial partners attached to the network, leveraging private sector involvement in schooling. Candidates for Teach for All posts are enticed by the network's linkages to top employers and fast track entry to leading graduate schools. In Nepal, leading business partners include HH Bajaj motorcycle distributors and Buddha Air, although it is unclear how they support education reform through their involvement in Teach for Nepal (TfN). One could posit that high-caliber and highly-motivated young teachers, a group not deeply attracted to teaching in Nepal, promise fresh perspectives for resource-constrained schools and disadvantaged pupils. Teacher content-knowledge, motivation and accountability have been identified as persistent problems in a system where professional identity remains tied to the political dramas of the central state. It is thus a model of innovation that promises enormous individual and societal returns. Critics, however, claim that such teachers project to pupils a narrow set of skills and interests related to economic productivity and performance; connecting young people to the 'powerful cultural circuit of capital' in ways that undermine schooled attempts to create social cohesion (Thrift, 2005: 34).

TfN presents their work as a contribution to the public good and a moral imperative to those otherwise historically neglected by state education. However, in European and North American examples, the Teach for All system has been the for-runner of new linkages between business and the state and a platform for commercial interests to enter and shape policy debates about education and its relation to society (Ball & Junemann 2012). The Teach for All system is thus a powerful site for the development of social capital as well as a governmental technology (Foucault, 1977) that shapes entrepreneurial subjects. Here, governance refers to the ways that individual teachers and their pupils come to manage their own conduct as entrepreneurial subjects, as well as how commercial and private interests come to reshape schools' purpose, priorities, internal decision-making mechanisms and community relations.

Concerns about Teach for All as a system of neo-liberal change are widespread (Friedrich, 2014) but empirical evidence of actual school processes is lacking. Research here could examine the system in Nepal as a 'micro-space' of neo-liberalism (Larner, 2003); exploring involved schools and educational leaders, business partners and civil society supporters as they extend the network and connect it to existing networks in the region and beyond. A major part of any field work – and something not attempted elsewhere – would involve observing and analyzing teaching situations in order to understand the relation of managerial and commercial ideology to pedagogy and thus to pupils' subjectivities. Interview and observational data could also be collected in schools' catchment areas and

from pupils' homes and communities. As the network consolidates, data could also capture public moments such as conferences, media events and careers fairs: all of which are used by the network to further its reach. Understanding the dynamics of such networks is vital.

Researching SE networks in education

Whilst studies of the kinds outlined here embody particular 'problems', history and context, they must also be understood in terms of the changing relations between state and private interests in public sector governance globally. The rise of pervasive networks of policy ideas and communities is central to these changing relations. Here, it is necessary to map emerging SE networks in Nepal in order to understand what types of actors gain prominent positions in policy debates, from which positions they are empowered to speak and how these shape governance priorities and processes. Such an analytical strategy might follow recent approaches to network analysis related to PPPs in education (Ball, 2012) as well as to the anthropology of policy (Shore & Wright, 1997) that I have used to create policy genealogies of education reform in Nepal (Carney & Bista, 2009). How might such analysis be conceptualized as field study?

Firstly, the agenda-setting and policy-framing process would need to be explored via document analysis of key policy moments as well as interviews with leading actors. For contemporary events, textual analysis and observations would need to capture data sets as diverse as official position papers (and their reception), social media usage, conferences, and opinion-shaping events. This work would lead to an identification of how major public policy 'problems' are being presented in Nepal, the 'solutions' offered to these issues, and the processes (material and non-material) through which, and by whom, new programmatic ideas are being developed.

Secondly, the intersubjective meaning of policy change could be operationalized via Verger's (2012) policy frame analysis which identifies key policy entrepreneurs as conduits of policy alternatives. There are growing numbers of such actors in Nepal who play roles in strategically framing and mobilizing programmatic ideas; translating and transposing them across policy fields (Boxenbaum & Battilana, 2005). Exploring their links to local, national, regional and global policy actors and ideas would generate further key nodal points, identifying additional actors for analysis and the 'argumentative shortcuts' (Gasper, 1996) used in solidifying policy interests and pathways.

By focusing on subjectivity and connecting individual biographies to macro-sociological structures, this approach to network analysis goes beyond oversimplified understandings of the policy subject as a 'self-maximizing productive unit operating

in a market of performances' (Ball, 2010: 126). Rather than assume such actors share generic (liberal) values, and have common skills/ training needs, the research program outlined here would attempt to uncover which type of individuals move into this field, what enabling environments are required to facilitate their success and how educational programs might support them.

Ball's network analyses of LFS (2012) and Olmedo, Bailey and Ball's (2013) investigation of the Teach for All network in Europe provide starting points for mapping emerging social relations in their historical and geopolitical complexity however, like Friedrich's (2014) study of the Teach for All program in the lower-income context of Argentina and Munday and Menashy's (2014) study of World Bank 'policy hypocrisy', one could envisage the production of subjectivities in Nepal to be more heterogeneous and contradictory than research evidence from European contexts might suggest. In Nepal, overarching market and commercial disciplining meets disparate community-building projects, diverse struggles for identity recognition and political justice and weak state commitments and infrastructure, limiting the coherence of a single unifying set of SE practices *or* effects. In this sense, the field of SE practice in Nepal is one of *potential* where the governance of individual subjectivities and institutional contexts is not settled but *emerging*. By highlighting the dynamics of SE networks, one could hope to play an active role both in critiquing dominant interests that try to exploit the discursive appeal of SE and to encourage lessor-heard SE voices, especially those focused on creating social value with a strong pro-poor orientation.

Concluding thoughts

As an emerging discourse with the power to organize our thoughts, SE in developing countries represents an 'economy of production and desire, but also of closure, difference, and violence' (Escobar, 1995: 214). This is a view held by few scholars of SE and one that is difficult to sustain because of the strongly normative basis of the field. Research in the Roskilde tradition aims to examine such regimes of representation and to destabilize them in order to start afresh in ways that respond to actual everyday life realities. Contrary to those who dismiss post-classical approaches to theorizing and field study, the strategy outlined here aims to reinvigorate our thinking about the possibilities for understanding, creating and enabling entrepreneurial subjectivities, to ground these in context-important, localized examples, and to build from such work a firmer foundation on which to talk about and engage in the world.

Resumé

Denne artikel introducerer til en forskningsdagsorden der retter sig mod studiet af socialt entrepreneurskab som del af uddannelsesreformer. Mens artiklen tager sit udgangspunkt i forskningserfaringer fra Nepal, er diskussionen relevant for SE-problemstillinger i 3 verdens-kontekst og samtidig også for andre sammenhænge, hvor man benytter sig af SE-strategier. Artiklen redegør for, hvordan skiftende styrings – og magtstrategier ser SE-strategier som mulige løsninger på en lang række problemstillinger, der er strukturelt forbundet med konflikter relateret til etnicitet, køn og klasse. SE byder sig til som en ny måde at organisere vores forståelse af sådanne forhold på men rummer samtidig muligheden for at indskrive historiske marginaliserede grupper på nye måder. En forskningsdagsorden, der fokuserer på af undersøge de levede erfaringer blandt deltagere i SE har samtidig som sin ambition at analysere sådanne muligheder og risici.

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